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ABSTRACT

Colleges and universities today understand that positive public attitudes about higher education are important because they affect their financial stability and public support of their academic programs. Recent opinion surveys highlight the public's view that colleges should provide more adequate career preparation, while students also see their college years as an important time for personal development. Student interests are particularly important because of their new lobbies, and because of the new direction in federal funding under the Education Amendments of 1972, which channel a substantial proportion of federal higher education funds to institutions through student choices. Last, the higher education community has also come to recognize that public and congressional understanding and support for its goals and programs are important to its well-being. To this end, new information services have been established to provide a sound relationship with federal agencies and the Congress. (MJM)

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HIGHER EDUCATION: PUBLIC ATTITUDES AND FEDERAL LEGISLATION

by Carol Herrnstadt Shulman

> The people think their colleges are fine. They want more of them, and they want more young people to go. They admire professors and they think the average undergraduate is a mighty nice sort of youngster. They are not unduly critical of present curricula, though somewhat pragmatic in their attitude toward them, and they are willing to give instructors quite a lot of freedom ("Higher Education . . ." 1949, p.2).

This approving public attitude toward higher education 25 years ago is not prevalent today. Instead, the general public's faith in colleges, as in other established institutions, has diminished over a period of time in which campus turbulence has made the public and its leaders look critically at higher education's performance. A recent Harris poll showed that only 40% of those surveyed (1,527 households) have a "great deal of confidence" in colleges. Eight years ago, the figure was 61% ("American Public Confidence . . ." 1974).

Colleges are concerned about the level of public confidence in higher education because they recognize that public opinion affects their financial and academic affairs. Recently, the Education Amendments of 1972 (Public Law 92-318) have underlined the importance of public opinion by treating higher education as a free market and allocating a substantial portion of federal higher education funds for direct student assistance (Wolanin and Gladieux in press; Leslie and Johnson 1974). As a result, federally assisted students have greater freedom of choice in college attendance. Their federal financial aid enables them to deemphasize economic considerations and to select institutions and programs solely on the basis of what best meets their needs. Colleges and universities that seek to attract these independent students must learn what their interests and needs are and how best to respond to them.

EXAMINING PUBLIC EXPECTATIONS

Attitudes toward higher education depend in part on how successfully colleges and universities meet public expectations. The public's understanding of what college goals are and should be has been examined in several states and in a number of communities surrounding individual institutions. On a broader basis, numerous discussions of national policy goals are available (Trivett 1973), but there do not appear to be any studies that analyze national public opinion.[1]

On the state level, two recent studies have recognized the importance of the public viewpoint in formulating goals for higher education. The first of these studies is the goals survey that Peterson (1973) conducted for California's legislative committee on the master plan for higher education. The survey sought the views of persons on 116 college campuses and in 95 local communities as to what they perceive are current and desired institutional goals. Twenty-four thousand people responded to Peterson's questionnaire, which listed ninety possible "outcome goals" (e.g., academic development and vocational preparation) and "process goals" (e.g., academic and personal freedom and intellectual/aesthetic environment) (Peterson 1973, p.8).

Interestingly, Peterson found that "compared to the other constituencies, students and off-campus citizens have a less clear sense of priorities—of what should and should not be important goals" (Peterson 1973, p.163). However, both students and local citizens did have distinct opinions about selected institutional goals, which they believed deserve greater emphasis. Thus, undergraduates believed that academic development is currently a very high goal, but they would have preferred to rank it much lower. At the same time, undergraduate students would give the goal of individual personal development greater priority than it now has, with private college undergraduates rating this as the highest goal for their institutions.

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[1]Fincher (1974) has commented that on a national level the public has conflicting expectations for higher education that result from clashing philosophies about American society. He notes that the concept of "meritocracy" in higher education grows out of the Jeffersonian belief that there is an aristocracy of talent, while the Jacksonian faith in the common man's ability to judge and govern has supported efforts to make higher education accessible to many levels of ability. Sensitive to these viewpoints, colleges have attempted to satisfy both kinds of demands. For example, the admissions process is competitive, but also seeks to broaden the college population base.

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Members of the community near the University of California's campuses believe that the goal of individual personal development has a relatively low priority, and they would accord it a higher one. Vocational preparation also is a goal that should be increasingly emphasized. As to freedom on campus, the community would reverse the high standing this goal now has. Peterson speculates that this apparent contradiction between greater approval for individual personal development but less favor toward freedom on campus occurs because "[s]eemingly the (adult) citizenry would like a pattern of 'human development' that is somewhat prescribed" (Peterson 1973, p.165). In this area of "process goals," Peterson believes that colleges can win local citizens to a more favorable attitude if campus representatives educate the community to the fact that colleges must have "relative freedom, controversy, and participation on campus" for students to develop intellectually and become responsible adults (p.173).

The second and more recent survey conducted for the Ohio Citizens' Task Force on Higher Education (1974) is also concerned with incorporating citizens' views into a state master plan for higher education. This survey of 1,067 Ohioans sought opinions on ease of access to higher education in the state, the current status of higher education's goals and programs, and the nature of future needs that should be met. Although the survey found that the public considered higher education in Ohio readily accessible in terms of ease of admission and geographical proximity, 51% of the respondents had not received any higher education. These people cited lack of money (28%), or lack of desire and the fact that their jobs do not require college education (26%). Surprisingly, however, 90% of the survey respondents ranked job preparation as the higher education goal that was second in importance only to quality teaching. Another suprising finding is that while 64% of the respondents believed higher education is more important now than in the past, persons with recent or extensive experience with higher education—those in the 18 to 24 age group and with professional training or education beyond the baccalaureate—saw it as less important today. All groups, however, gave their greatest support to commercial and technical education.

Summarizing its findings, the Ohio study observed:

> . . . the opinions and attitudes of respondents point to a need to reconsider the existing priorities in higher education—to provide alternatives to traditional baccalaureate degree programs. . . . The opinions of Ohioans imply a need for more job-oriented, less time-consuming higher education (Dawson 1974, p.36).

THE STUDENT AS A CONSUMER OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The new student aid programs established in the Education Amendments of 1972 make it essential for institutions to have greater awareness of student expectations for higher education. In a new approach to federal funding for higher education, the amendments give aid directly to students according to their need, who can then support those programs that promise to fulfill their expectations. As one commentator on this legislation noted:

> Student choices were selected as the surrogate for federal choices, and the mechanism through which student choices are to operate is the free market (Wolanin and Gladieux, in press).[2]

Thus, the amendments direct aid to students through an array of programs: Basic Educational Opportunity Grants (BEOG), State Student Incentive Grants, and federal guaranteed loan programs.[3] Even appropriations for some purely institutional aid depend, by means of complicated formulas, on the number of federally assisted students enrolled at an institution and the size of the institution's student body (Education Amendments of 1972, Title X).

Evidence of students' increased importance appears in numerous articles on students as consumers of higher education (e.g., "Improving Information . . ." 1974; Olson 1974; Orlans 1974; and Van Dyne 1974). A Fund for the Improvement for Postsecondary Education report indicates that there is a need for sound consumer information as a basis for decisionmaking in higher education:

> The stakes in these choices [on postsecondary attendance] include not only the happiness of the individuals involved, and the needs of society for appropriate kinds of talent; with the increasing reliance on student-based funding of postsecondary education, student choice is an increasingly important determinate in the allocation of scarce resources among institutions ("Improving Information . . ." 1974, p.1).

With this background, it is not surprising that governmental action has been taken or is being considered to support student interests (Andringa 1974; "Consumer Protection . . ." 1974). One frequent government concern is the equitable regulation of student loans. For example, the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (Office of Education) has issued new regulations on guaranteed student loans ("Guaranteed Student Loan Programs" 1974) that include provisions to protect students against unfair repayment requirements and to insure that students will have loan funds available throughout the school year.

There is also a new awareness that students need assistance in choosing programs that will best meet their needs so that their time and financial investments will be worthwhile. For example, the Education Commission of the States' (ECS) conference on consumer protection recommended that ECS establish an information clearinghouse on all postsecondary programs for use by students, counselors, and others. An additional purpose of the proposed clearinghouse would be to foster communication between education and consumer interest groups ("Consumer Protection in . . ." 1974).

Furthermore, students are organizing to protect their own interests by sponsoring national and state lobbies that may not necessarily share the viewpoint of college administrations about what legislation is needed. For example, the National Student Lobby, located in Washington, D.C., favored a

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[2]State aid programs also foster this approach. The 1974-75 funds for need-based aid for all states has increased by 25% over the previous year (Boyd 1974, p.3).

[3]The amendments require the college-based programs (i.e., programs such as Supplementary Education Opportunity Grants, State Student Incentive Grants, College Work-Study, and National Direct Student Loans that give federal appropriations for student assistance to colleges which then allocate these funds to students) to be funded at specific levels before the Treasury may pay out EOG funds. Thus, in any fiscal year, the Supplementary Educational Opportunity Grants program must receive an appropriation of at least $130,093,000; the Work-Study Programs appropriation must be at least $237,400,000; and appropriations for institutional student loan programs must be at least $286,000,000.

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student aid approach during the congressional debates on higher education financing in the early 1970's, while the higher education establishment pushed for institutional aid. At the state level, student lobbies can be especially influencial because students' recently-acquired voting power may enable them to influence election results in many state legislative districts (Van Dyne 1974). Student lobbies are most active in California, New York, and Illinois, and are beginning in other states. In California, for example, state legislators have ranked the student lobby started in 1971 as twelfth in effectiveness; its most notable success was having $1 million from the governor's financing department added to the University of California's budget for improving undergraduate teaching (Van Dyne 1974).

In proportion to the discussions available on student consumer protection, there appears to be relatively little general analysis of students' interests and needs, perhaps because postsecondary education includes such great diversity that the "1970's student" does not fit a single description. However, some survey and descriptive information is available that indicates students today are concerned with fulfilling two basic educational goals: achieving self-knowledge and personal development; and career preparation (Murphy 1974; Howard 1974; Olson 1974; and Yankelovich 1974).

Yankelovich (1974) observes that these concerns are frequently bound together. He found in his sample of 1,000 students that about one-third of today's students attend college largely for career preparation, but also believe that self-fulfillment is important. Consequently, these students seek to integrate job and personal satisfaction within the conventional career system. Another third of his student sample, generally those from affluent families, is concerned more with personal fulfillment rather than conventional career considerations. Finally, one-third of his sample stresses the pragmatic considerations of career preparation. Olson reports that surveys of over 2,500 students conducted for the National Commission on Financing Postsecondary Education indicate student skepticism about the availability of post-graduate employment. Instead, he found that "the overwhelming emphasis in the discussion of education purposes was THE OPPORTUNITY TO EXPRESS ONE'S SELF DEVELOPMENT" (sic) (Olson 1974, pp. 189-190).

PUBLIC ATTITUDES AFFECTING LEGISLATION

The Education Amendments of 1972 reflected changes in public attitudes on social issues that occurred during the 1960's. A study of the 1972 amendments indicates that elected representatives were sensitive to and identify with such changes, and will work to translate new attitudes into law.[4]

The 1972 amendments evolved over a period of time beginning in 1969, when Congress began to consider renewing higher education legislation, including the Higher Education Act of 1965. This earlier legislation reflected a mid-1960's confidence that a college education would enable disadvantaged students to progress socially and economically. Programs were therefore enacted to give these students greater opportunity for higher education. So overwhelming was this faith that the Higher Education Act of 1965 received only 22 negative votes in the House and only three in the Senate.

Since 1965, however, several developments have caused citizens and their representatives to question their belief that higher education can solve social and economic problems. The campus demonstrations were the most prominent of these developments. They brought to public attention student dissatisfaction with the relevance of their curricula and the indifference of their teachers. The demonstrations focused public attention on the students' investment in higher education. There was considerable sentiment that students —consumers of higher education—were being slighted in educational institutions in favor of support for research-oriented professors and graduate students.

During this period, colleges and universities also experienced escalating costs that could not be met by income. Taking the most direct approach, they raised tuitions at a rapid rate. These increases were particularly hard on middle-class parents who wrote their congressmen that college costs were making higher education inaccessible. Simultaneously, college administrators at public and private institutions requested more government and foundation support, and thereby invited a close look at their managerial practices, which were frequently found to be wasteful and inefficient. These financial developments necessitated more federal support, but they also led legislators to consider seriously whether institutions should be granted funds to manage at their own discretion or whether some other funding scheme should be developed.

Despite these changes in public attitudes toward higher education, the belief still prevailed in society and in government that equal educational opportunity was a right granted to all citizens. Congress further believed that such opportunity was not fully developed by the Higher Education Act of 1965 and that more legislation was needed.

The 1972 amendments represented a congressional effort to express the public concerns about higher education that had evolved in the 1960's. For example, public dissatisfaction with higher education curricula and programs is reflected in the amendments. Wolanin and Gladieux note that the amendments usually use the broad term "postsecondary education" rather than "colleges and universities":

> The intent is to break the stereotype that education beyond high school means a four-year academic program leading to a baccalaureate degree. Explicit federal recognition and legitimacy are accorded to programs of career preparation and occupational education . . . (in press).

Further, Congress encouraged institutions to offer programs that will be attractive to federally-assisted students by linking institutional aid to the number of federally-assisted students enrolled at the institutions.

The 1972 amendments support equal educational opportunity through the Basic Educational Opportunity Grant Program (BEOG), which awards grants based on need directly to students. By assuring a basic income to students, the BEOG program is intended to encourage low and lower-middle income high school students to consider further education (Wolanin and Gladieux, in press).

While the amendments focus on making higher education more accessible and meaningful for students, they also reflect congressional complaints that there is a lack of information available on the problems and prospects of postsecondary education. One House staff member observed that higher education associations and campus representatives

[4]The following discussion is based on Gladieux and Wolanin's manuscript, "A Backdrop of Ferment and Reappraisal in Higher Education."

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failed to produce hard data and solid analysis during the debates on legislation to assist the congressmen. Such information should have been forthcoming because of the higher education community's need to restore public confidence in their activities and to win congressional assistance for their well-publicized financial difficulties (Andringa 1974). Therefore, the amendments require 12 reports on postsecondary education. For example, the legislation creating the National Commission on the Financing on the Postsecondary Education states:

> It is the purpose of this section to authorize a study of the impact of the past, present, and anticipated private, local, State and Federal Support for postsecondary education, the appropriate role for the States in support of higher education . . ., alternative student assistance programs, and the potential Federal, State, and private participation in such programs (Education Amendments of 1972, §140a).

SUMMARY

Colleges and universities today understand that positive public attitudes about higher education are important because they affect their financial stability and public support of their academic programs. Recent opinion surveys highlight the public's view that colleges should provide more adequate career preparation, while students also see their college years as an important time for personal development. Student interests are particularly important because of their new lobbies, and because of the new direction in federal funding under the Education Amendments of 1972, which channel a substantial proportion of federal higher education funds to institutions through student choices. Last, the higher education community has also come to recognize that public and congressional understanding and support for its goals and programs is important to its well-being. To this end, new information services have been established to provide a sound relationship with federal agencies and the Congress.

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